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ABSTRACT

Essays in which 40 freshman composition students described unusual or extraordinary persons were analyzed for the charcteristic choices that males and females made and for the typical ways men and women were described. The analysis yielded seven findings with social implications. Both males and females tended to choose males as objects for description. Male writers were more likely than female writers to describe middle-aged and older subjects, but both males and females avoided describing older women. Male writers wrote significantly more concrete descriptions than females. Both males and females were more concrete when describing persons of the opposite sex. Both sexes also used a broader range of descriptors and used them more frequently when describing males than females. Females tended to reserve some descriptors exclusively for males, the most frequent ones emphasizing activity. Females used descriptors pertaining to interpersonal relationships more frequently than males. (RL)

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Stylistic Choice: Sex Stereotypes in the Descriptive Mode

Dorothy Margaret Guinn

The study I am presenting the results of today began with curiosity about the different way males and females perceive their own sex and the opposite sex. An article, "Face-ism," in Psychology Today had piqued this curiosity. In it Archer, Kimes, and Barrios suggest, on the basis of photos and ads in magazines and newspapers and drawings produced by males and females, that people to a large extent think more readily of women's bodies and men's faces. In the drawings respondents were asked to produce, both males and females tended to clearly define men's facial features and ignore their bodies and vaguely portray women's faces, even leaving them featureless at times, but show more of their bodies and in greater detail. I wondered if the same choices, and others reflecting people's conceptions of males and females, would show up in written descriptions.

To answer this question I obtained forty descriptions of people from freshman composition students who responded to this assignment:

> Write an essay of approximately 500 words in which you describe an unusual person you have seen and/or met on the TU campus, someone who struck you as particularly noticeable, that is, "stood out from crowd." Strive to make your description a vivid and accurate recreation so that your reader will see or experience the person as you did.

My major research questions were two: what characteristic choices do males and females make when describing people, and what are the typical ways men are described as opposed to women?

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Let me first summarize briefly my key findings in answer to these questions before I go on to explain them. The first two findings have to do with who was chosen to be described. The others have to do with descriptive choices:

1. Both males and females chose males predominantly as objects for description.
2. Male writers were more likely than female writers to describe middle-aged and older subjects. Both males and females avoided describing older women.
3. Male writers wrote significantly more concrete descriptions than females.
4. Both males and females were more concrete when describing persons of the opposite sex than their own sex.
5. Both males and females used a broader range of descriptors and used them more frequently when describing males than females.
6. Females, particularly, reserved some descriptors exclusively for males, the most frequently used of them emphasizing activity.
7. Females used descriptors pertaining to interpersonal relationships more frequently than males.

I arrived at these findings by analyzing the descriptors students used in their essays. By descriptors I mean the phrases and clauses that carry the major descriptive burden of a piece of discourse, not only adjectives: e.g. "the squareness of his jaw," "He looked like a wolfman," "Her favorite color is blue." I used a list of thirty-seven descriptors which had been ranked

on a continuum from most concrete to most abstract with each descriptor assigned a mean rank, the lowest for the most concrete descriptor, the highest for the most abstract. They range from 1.64 for sex to 30.86 for non-observable activities. At the concrete end of the scale along with sex are such descriptors as race and body appearance; behavior patterns and past attributes are examples of descriptors in the middle range; feeling toward observer and philosophic orientation fall at the abstract end of the scale along with non-observable activities. I read through the essays, labeling the various descriptors and counting how often they occurred. For example, "She wasn't beautiful, in a dream sort of way" was labeled "general appearance - one." "Her hair was light, almost white as it flowed to the middle of her back" was labeled "face/head features - two."

Once this task was finished, all discrepancies in numbers had to be accommodated. On the one hand, the total of forty essays was made up of twenty-five descriptions by males and fifteen by females. On the other hand, there were twenty-eight descriptions of males versus twelve of females. Figures had to be adjusted to make comparisons of writers, subjects, and descriptors valid, that is, on a ratio of 1:1.

Now let me discuss my findings stemming from my research questions.

First, as I said, males predominated as objects of description. Males chose subjects at a ratio of slightly less than 2:1; females chose male subjects by almost 3:1. My results can be compared with those of a study done by Alleen Pace Nilsen ("Old Blondes Just Dye Away: Relationships Between Sexism and Ageism," Language Arts, Vol. 55, No 2, Feb. 1978, pp. 175-179). She was testing whether men or women enjoyed more prestige when young or old. The

lists her respondents made showed that overall men are easier to think of than women; there were three times as many men listed as women. Apparently, it is also easier to think of men even when prestige is not a factor and even when the odds might favor thinking of a woman. Male professors outnumber female professors on TU's as well as other college campuses, and male students outnumber female students. So females are the odd ones out, the ones who should stand out from the crowd. One stereotype--indeed, fact of life--is that males are more prominant in our society, not only on campus. Men sit in imposing numbers on boards of all sorts, in the Congress, state legislatures, and local councils. They reign supreme on the Supreme Court. Apparently, traditional expectations are so engrained that even when sex is unspecified in an assignment, and even when the assignment could well lead respondents toward choosing females, people and especially women, still find it easier to think of males. It is almost as if they construed the assignment as "describe an unusual or outstanding male."

My second finding about who was chosen to be described has to do with age. Before discussing my findings though, I should point out that my assigning the descriptions to one of three age categories--young, middle-aged, or old--was based more on the descriptors used or my knowledge of a professor or graduate assistant being described than students' judgments of age. Freshman view age myopically. Anyone outside their youthful college circle tends to be classified as at least middle-aged. For one not to disintegrate at forty seems a miracle. Witness these remarks: "His forty five year old face, that is in danger of wearing out, carries a frank smile"; "Although he is getting old, his well built forty-year old body is still in good shape."

And a middle-aged woman (whose age was pegged at sixty) with enough wit and energy to be a fellow student was viewed with amazement.

Based on my assigning the descriptions to age categories, I found that the students as a group were more likely to describe young people, but not overwhelmingly so. The male writers were almost equally inclined to describe men in any age category; six young men, six middle-aged men, five old men, a balance not demonstrated by the female writers. Women described two and two-thirds more young men that middle-aged men, and described no old men at all. The male writers described one and a half times as many young women as middle aged women and the female writers more than twice as many. Both males and females avoided describing older women.

The choices made by the students seem to reflect our cultural norms. Americans subscribe to a youth cult. The big question about Ronald Reagan's running for president is not his ability but whether at sixty-nine he is too old. But the youth syndrome holds more sway over women than men. Ads picture mothers and daughters looking more like sisters, whereas dads appearing with sons are noticably older. Even the rare successful female executive who strides across the page or television screen is slender and beautiful, looking not a day over thirty. Ad after ad extolls products purporting to maintain a woman's youth or reverse the signs of age. Women more than men are loved and admired for youth and beauty, the two going hand in hand. Men, on the other hand, are loved and admired chiefly for their worldly success, the wealth and fame that increases with experience and age. A man does not usually reach his peak of prestige until middle-age. Again, ads reflect this stereotype. The successful male executive often sports silver hair and

distinguished age lines. Maturity, at least to some extent, is a plus for males, a minus for females. In choosing their people to describe and in the way that they describe them, the students showed themselves to be captives of their culture. All avoided the issue of old age when it came to women, but the female writers particularly appeared even more threatened by age than the males and "tuned out" any old people.

I will go on now to discuss some of my findings about the way people were described.

First, based on the descriptors used and the number of times used, a statistically significant trend emerged showing males writing more concrete descriptions than females. The mean rank of the male writers' descriptors on a scale was 14.93, while that of the female writers was 19.22. These figures seem to support the stereotype of males being more objective, females more subjective. But interestingly enough both males and females were more concrete when describing persons of the opposite sex than persons of the same sex. It may well be that the more concrete descriptors--such as body appearance, age, face/head features, nationality, clothing, and so forth--are of little significance personally when describing a person of one's own sex and so tend to be taken for granted. The writer can, in effect, leap from concrete facts to abstractions inferred from those facts. He or she could, for example, reasonably assume personality traits (thirty-four on the scale) from the clothing a person wears (seven on the scale), if he or she had, through personal experience, a basis for making such generalizations.

When describing a member of the opposite sex, the key descriptors for <u>both</u> males and females were face/head features, voice, and body state, all on the concrete end of the scale. Both males and females used these descriptors

twice as often or more to describe a person of the opposite sex than a person of the same sex. But whereas men virtually limited themselves to face/head features, voice, and body state as key features when describing women, women added a number of other features to this list when describing men. Other key descriptors for females when describing males were: a man's general appearance, how he moves, his skills, behavior, possessions, and relationship to her. When females described males, they presented a more complex, differentiated whole than when males described females.

One thing apparent from my findings about the descriptors males and females use for the opposite sex is that they do not agree with the findings reported in "Face-ism." In that study, as I mentioned earlier, both males and females universally were as detailed about a man's face as they were vague about a woman's and more conscious of a woman's body. It may be that more writing samples would reveal a closer correlation with the drawing samples, or it may be that writing encourages different focuses than drawing because it allows for certain possibilities--description of voice quality, for example, and body state (energy level, general health, and so forth), exclusive to the written mode.

Another finding having to do with the way people are described is that both males and females used a broader range of descriptors and used them more often when describing males than females. Further, females, particularly, reserved some descriptors exclusively for males, the most frequently used of them emphasizing activity: head/face movements occurred thirty-eight times, body movements fifty-two times. We are reminded of frequent scenes in novels and films in which a man acts while a woman stands by wringing her hands, face

taut with emotion and concern for the man. The stereotypical notion that women are more passive, men more active was reflected in these student papers. Further, more detail being lavished on the men being described points to more about them being seen as worthy of notice.

The last significant finding I want to discuss is that females used descriptors pertaining to interpersonal relationships more frequently than males. These kinds of descriptors were key features of female descriptions, whether males or females. Another descriptor closely related to those having to do with interpersonal relationships is personality traits, and it is one female writers used oftener than male writers . It is largely because of these descriptors which cluster at the abstract end of the scale that female descriptions were more abstract than male descriptions. Again a stereotype seems to be supported. Concern for others and interpersonal relationships are widely believed to be more "feminine" than "masculine" qualities. Studies based on the theoretical framework of Frederick Herzberg seem to support the importance of interpersonal relationships to women. On the issue of job factors leading to satisfaction and dissatisfaction, for example, female professionals uniquely mention interpersonal relationships as leading to job satisfaction. Women more often than men report such things as straightening out a misunderstanding with the boss as a satisfying job experience, while men prefer such satisfactions as a challenging assignment.

This picture I have presented of descriptive choices made by males and females for describing males and females is incomplete, more of a sketch than a picture. It covers only the highlights, and the evidence upon which it is based is not extensive. Nonetheless, the study is suggestive and does allow drawing some conclusions. In general the students reflect comtemporary

society's stereotypes. Men are seen as more significant than women; they are the doers, more interested in things and actions while women are the "be-ers," more interested in personality traits and interpersonal relationships. Age is more a handicap for women than men. Because of the descriptors chosen, males' descriptions tend to present a larger, more public image of people, females' descriptions tend to present finer detailed, more personal pictures.

What this means to us as teachers is this. We may want to encourage females to adopt the male viewpoint, the "prestige" values of our society. We may want to encourage females to be more impersonal than personal, more concrete than abstract, more objective than subjective. But we might also want to encourage development of the female viewpoint. An emphasis on the additive nature of female descriptive choices, which imposes an open-ended quality to their descriptions, could encourage a complementary open-mindedness. A higher value placed on interpersonal relationships could encourage people to get along better.

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